

BOOK REVIEW

Ustad Ameer Khan: Jivan aur Rachanaen

Tej Pal Singh, Prerna Arora

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The last few years have seen the rise of a very welcome trend in the capital's musical scene. Longtime pupils of some masterly vocalists have begun writing with both devotion and acuity on the life and art of their mentors; and have, incidentally, recorded for posterity quite a few Khayals and Taranas of rare excellence, taking due care to provide the full notations too of the compositions cited. This can easily be an ideal way to preserve our heritage of music unimpaired, provided the information in print in replenished with watchful listening to the maestros' recorded music which is available in plenty today, at least in the case of the two vocalists I have presently in mind: Ustads Bade Ghulam Ali and Ameer Khan. On Ghulam Ali we had a very good book in 2003 (edited by M. Gilani and Q. Hyder); and now, in 2005, we have an even better book on Ameer Khan, in Hindi, to which the present review relates.

This Ameer Khan book is jointly authored by Tej Pal Singh and his leading pupil Dr. Prerna Arora; and I have no reason to doubt the veracity of the two claims made (by the senior author, Tej Pal) in the very preface of the book: first, that the book is singular because there is no other book (in the field of Hindustani music) which could fairly claim to have been written with such an unremitting concern for truth of facts and happenings, and by someone who has had such a long and close communion with an Ustad of acknowledged excellence (as Tej Pal Singh himself); and second, that a major impulse in writing this book has been the desire to make the maestro's rich repertoire of traditional (and his own) compositions accessible to lovers of Khayal-singing. Here I may add at once that chapter XII of the work provides the text and melodic notation of as many as fortythree Khayal compositions,

and is followed by a partly similar presentation of seven Taranas in the chapter XIII which has added substantially to my knowledge of this particular genre of Hindustani vocal music.

Tej Pal Singh is fervently devoted and ceremonially enrolled pupil (see the picture on p. 23) of Ustad Ameer Khan. So, on the whole the work is very sympathetic to the maestro in question. Yet there are at least three places where Tej Pal shows some independence of spirit. First, on p. 191, he ventures to offer his own interpretation of the text of a *Darbari* composition. Next he refutes the view, aired by some overfond fans of Ameer Khan, that even during his sleep he would keep marking the rhythm with a toe (p. 87). And finally, on p. 112, we see him objecting to the maestro's use of *komal gandhar* in raga Megh, and his (Ameer Khan's) acceptance of the protest—quietly, to be sure; but so wholeheartedly that the deviance in question was never repeated by him in subsequent recitals.

As a vocalist himself, I may add, Tej Pal is by no means a non-entity. Along with his younger brother (Surinder Singh)—the two make the well-known duo, Singh Bandhu—he has won the (2004) Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for excellence in classical vocal music. The Brothers have been singing together for years, and have won recognition all along as a duo. So it is only proper that though he has not played any part in producing the book under review, Surinder Singh has received due mention in it wherever the context of facts demanded it.

Fidelity to facts is indeed the crowning feature of this work. In this context one particular instance of sheer academic integrity has impressed me specially. Nobody would (or could) have complained had the (following) information not been provided; but the authors have duly taken pains to distinguish (on p. xvi) those compositions the text and melodic plan of which have both been provided by the maestro himself from the ones in respect of which he has done only the *swara-rachna*. There is a careful mention even of such minuscule, but truthful details as the following: Ameer Khan's varying choices of his

adhara swaras at different stages of his career as a performer (59–60); a rare indulgence on the part of A.I.R. (New Delhi) authorities in allowing the Ustad to slightly overrun, because of his sheer engrossment in singing, the allotted time length, in virtue of which the immediately following news broadcast was delayed by two minutes (117); his commissioning of a Tanpura with six strings (61); the occasions when, in times which had yet to begin looking on music as a respectable pursuit, Ameer Khan had to stay in houses of ill repute (71); and the quite spontaneous changing of the text of a Darbari composition by him as his devotional fervour swelled during the very course of singing (71). Yet another index of the authors' penchant for truth and accuracy is provided by the fact that they have taken due care to determine the exact pronunciation and esoteric/mystical significance of the Persian couplets used by Ameer Khan in his Taranas by taking the help of a Delhi University professor of Persian (200). At the same time, more than once, they have rightly emphasized the inability of notation to capture all that is there in actual music.

However, from the viewpoint of sheer technique the following details deserve to be mentioned specially: a very educative account of *merkhand* and *paltas* employing different *jatis* of laya (8–14); a quick listing of such compositions in Ameer Khan's repertoire as place the *sama* at the अ sound, and so make the focal beat acquire the requisite distinctness (51); the information that Ameer Khan would revel in using segments of different *jatis* in the run of the *selfsame* tana (p. 39) and that he is the first to popularize the unusually reposeful use of *jhoomra* tala (45) in dealing with which the vocalist has to be specially wary in bearing in mind the different placements of the two *tirkits* (46). I have thought it necessary to italicize the word *popularize* because Ameer Khan is surely not the first to use this rhythm.

As I say so, I have in mind a Vilambit Khayal, set in raga *todi* and *jhoomra* tala, which was recorded by Sangeet Natak Akademi about the year 1966. The singer was Ustad Altaf Hussain Khan (of Khurja gharana); and I distinctly remember that he sang it with the requisite measure of poise, quite without *drut* tonal turns and twists;

and, what is more, with an effective employment of the device known as *Kanbharna*,—a device which saves the singer from the possible charge that, as the very anchor of a whole recital, a *sthayi* should not look broken on the inside. (I hasten to add that the authors themselves ascribe the renewal of the use of *jhoomra* tala in singing to Ustad Abdul Waheed Khan p. 45).

Anyway, along with a fairly analytic—but all along sympathetic—account of the major excellence of Ameer Khan's *gayaki*, the authors (of the book under review) have also taken care to highlight his views on music, the more acceptable of which may be put as follows:

Our music belongs to a tradition which is distinguished by contributions from such saintly figures as *Surdas* and *Amir Khusro*. So what is here paramount is *bhakti bhava*; and merely frolicsome turns and twists (or words of vulgar import) are quite out of order (90). Ameer Khan would in fact insist that the paramount aim of music is not just to entertain but to tranquillize and elevate our minds (*Ibid*). *Tadamya* or intense attunement with the melodic run is quite as necessary for the musician at work as for his audience (*Ibid*); and the relish of good music is equally open to men of different faiths (90–91). Music is indeed a great unifying force. Above all, the essentials of the art of music make such an intense singleness that the partition of India could do nothing to ruffle it. One cannot even visualize the possibility that four of the seven swaras could stay back in India and the remain three cross over to and settle in Pakistan (90–91).

There is however one particular view of Ameer Khan which has been cited (quite unquestioningly) by the authors as follows and which I find it difficult to swallow:

Look! a good voice has to model itself after the shape of a pyramid; that is, it should be broad at the base (or lower notes) and increasingly thin and pointed as it traverses the higher notes. (48).

Now, I submit, if this view is accepted we will have to withdraw the very wide acclaim which has so far been accorded to the legendary Rehmat Khan whose tanas were admired essentially

because they appeared to boom and sparkle at the *taar swaras*, like an *anar* that is commonly used in a display of fireworks; and to Ustad Faiyaz Khan whose singing of *taar* notes in raga Jogiya, as energized with the formal devices known as *laag-daant*, used to thunder, so to say, with poignant feeling. Surprisingly, the author do not look askance at the view in question, and I can only wonder how this indifference squares with the claim made (by Tej Pal Singh) in the preface that 'we, (the co-authors) will analyze, quite impartially, every aspect of (Ameer Khan's) personal life and *gayaki*' (xi). True, the word *views* does not figure in this claim; but *every* aspect of a musician's individual life surely does not exclude the views that he expresses on an art which is in a way his very life. And, to turn to actual singing, if the maestro abstained from singing the *taar* notes—say, न or म—in *open akara* (p. 51) is it not to be regarded as a limitation of his voice rather than as a passable accordance of practice with an acceptable view about the variation of *akara* in its passage from *madya* to *taar saptak*? Above all, I just feel bewildered by the remark, made with implicit approval, that Ameer Khan looked on *sargams* as the most suitable medium of expressing *bhava* (52) if the word *bhava* is taken to mean emotion? *Sargams* can surely appear to frisk or weave intricate designs; but their capacity to express designable emotions has got to be argued for, rather than quietly accepted.

However, these are not the only occasions where the book looks deficient in restraint and objectivity. Some such analogies disfigure it as are a bit too indulgent to carry conviction. Thus, Ameer Khan's musical utterance in general and the unusually long pauses that appear to divide his singing of *sthayi* have been likened, respectively, to attunement with God and the state of quiet worship. Further, if only in passing, a parallel has also been hinted between the varying tenor of Ameer Khan's singing and a passage in *samadhi* from the *savikalpa* to the *nirvikalpa* state (58).

Such glib writing shows scant awareness of the fact that where, as in Khayal-singing generally, a major segment of the total recital is provided by

tanas which are all alike collocations of *different swaras*—and where the singing is a man like Ameer Khan who has (on the authors' own view) devoted a fair part of his early life to the practice of *sargam-singing*—very great care has to be taken to keep the swaras mutually and identifiably distinct (see, here, the authors' own remark on p. 54, that the discreteness or बना of swaras in Ameer Khan's tanas would have the clarity of pearls); and that the act of distinguishing, however subdued it be, is necessarily some reflection or thinking which is precisely what *nirvikalpa samadhi* just cannot brook.

At this point, I may also refer to what is a plain and persistent, if inadvertent discrepancy in the authors' way of writing. On p. x Tej Pal blazons out his resolve to avoid mere verbiage studiously. Yet this avowal is at once followed by a Sanskrit quotation from *Vivekadhudamani* which does not make any new point. What is more, quite a few such analogies abound in the book as are not only needless and merely ornate, but too exaggerated to carry conviction. Thus, on p. 47, Ameer Khan's *gayaki* has been likened to the upsurge of *jivatma* to become one with its very source, that is, *Paramatma*. On the very next page, a parallel has been drawn between the maestro's singing in the *mandra* and (a diver's?) attempt to collect precious stones from the very bed of an ocean; and a few pages later—one p. 53 to be precise—Ameer Khan's toying with swaras (in the act of singing *sargams*) has been said to be similar to Mother Parwati's *tasya* dance. Here, in place of mere rhetoric, what a serious reader would have preferred from the authors, who are both well versed in the art of music, is a few actual (notated) instances of such collocations of swaras and formal devices, including the varying modulation of voice, as may look like clear tonal analogues of elevated longing, exploration of depths, and tangentiality, as against robustness and directness of dealing with swaras. Where the authors do look like moving a little in this needful direction, they fall short of phenomenological exactness. Thus, in suggesting that if the *sama*-letter is chosen to be आ, the *sthayi* will clearly look like opening up (मुकरित् p. 51), they forget that the suggested semblance (of the

sthayi's opening up, not merely the sama-point's looking open) will not come about unless the immediately preceding run-up to the 'sama' proceeds in a slightly subdued akara.

However, these are all but minor and occasional irritants in the book and are clearly outweighed by its many positive features. I have pointed them out simply because I would be happy to see them remedied in the second edition which the book is very likely to run into. Otherwise, the work's overall value is immense. The very division of its chapters is an index of its comprehensive concern. Two of these (nos. 4, 5) relate to Ameer Khan's *gayaki*; no. 7 is devoted to his life, and another, no. 8 to his personality. The maestro as a teacher is the subject of the chapter 9; and chapters 10 and 11 relate, respectively, to some of Ameer Khan's recitals, the many accolades that he deservedly won, and his contribution as a playback singer.

Such a many-sided and meticulous approach has naturally enabled the authors to reveal some very interesting and not widely known facts about Ameer Khan's life, personality, and work; and I take pleasure in citing some of these as given in the book:

On the occasion of Baqr-Id Ameer Khan would avoid resorting to the customary animal sacrifice and prefer instead distributing the money needed for buying a goat as alms among the poor (90). Basically, Ameer Khan was not only humane, but simple in his life and tastes, and also duly alive to the merits of other vocalists. This is borne out by the following evidence of facts. While participating in the 5-day East-West Music Encounter at Azad Bhawan (1964) he had to stay at Asoka Hotel with the other participants; but instead of exulting in the regality of the place, where he had to conform to its formal living style throughout the day, he would prefer to spend a relaxed evening (in a *lungi*) at the homely residence of his pupil, Tej Pal Singh (86). Further, it was at Ameer Khan's express insistence that D.V. Paluskar was chosen (by Naushad Sahib) to provide Baiju Bawara's voice in the film named after Tansen's vanquisher. What is more, when (after seeing the film) some of the Ustad's close pupils asked him as to why he had condescended to appear 'defeated' in the film by a younger artist, Ameer Khan's forthright

answer was: "A 'defeat' in a film is no real index of actual inferiority; and, after all, he (D.V.) is the son of (no less a person than) the lion-hearted Vishnudigambarji" (128).

What, however, seem to be most directly related to the singular quality of his music is Ameer Khan's personal equanimity in life. In spite of many inhibiting factors—such as the loss of his mother when he was just a child, a more or less unsettled married life, and rejection by the audience at his very first important concert (Mirzapur Conference: p. 72)—he struck gamely to the task of bending public taste towards his uncommon *gayaki*. As a result, the ultimate recognition of his merit was so rich and manifold that it could be the envy of the best of our musicians; So it is only proper that the authors have taken care to provide a quick list of the many accolades won by Ameer Khan (p. 121–122), culminating in the award of Padma Bhushan in 1971.

For those, however, who wish to enrich and improve their own singing the most relevant part of the book is provided by pp. 130–214. Here, indeed, we have a virtual treasury of compositions—in both Khayal and Taranas genres—all duly notated; and so it is not without reason that a superstar like Pandit Bhimsen Joshi has condescended to provide the first meaningful page of the book with some kindly words by way of blessing the venture. As for its final chapter, quite in tune with its running care for details, it provides a graphic account of Ameer Khan's death by accident and the post-mortem encomia showered on him by luminaries in the music world.

In fine, the book is not only a superb presentation of Ameer Khan's life, art, and creativity, but a clear, if incidental index of the authors' own commitment. It abounds in authentic photographs, the more striking of which are the two that appears on p. 21, showing the maestro's *baithak* and *mukhmudra* while singing (though only the latter is clearly seen here); and is acceptable also in respect of printing and cover design. I am therefore confident that the book will get a place in every music library and the attention of all those who are wedded to serious Khayal-gayaki.

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